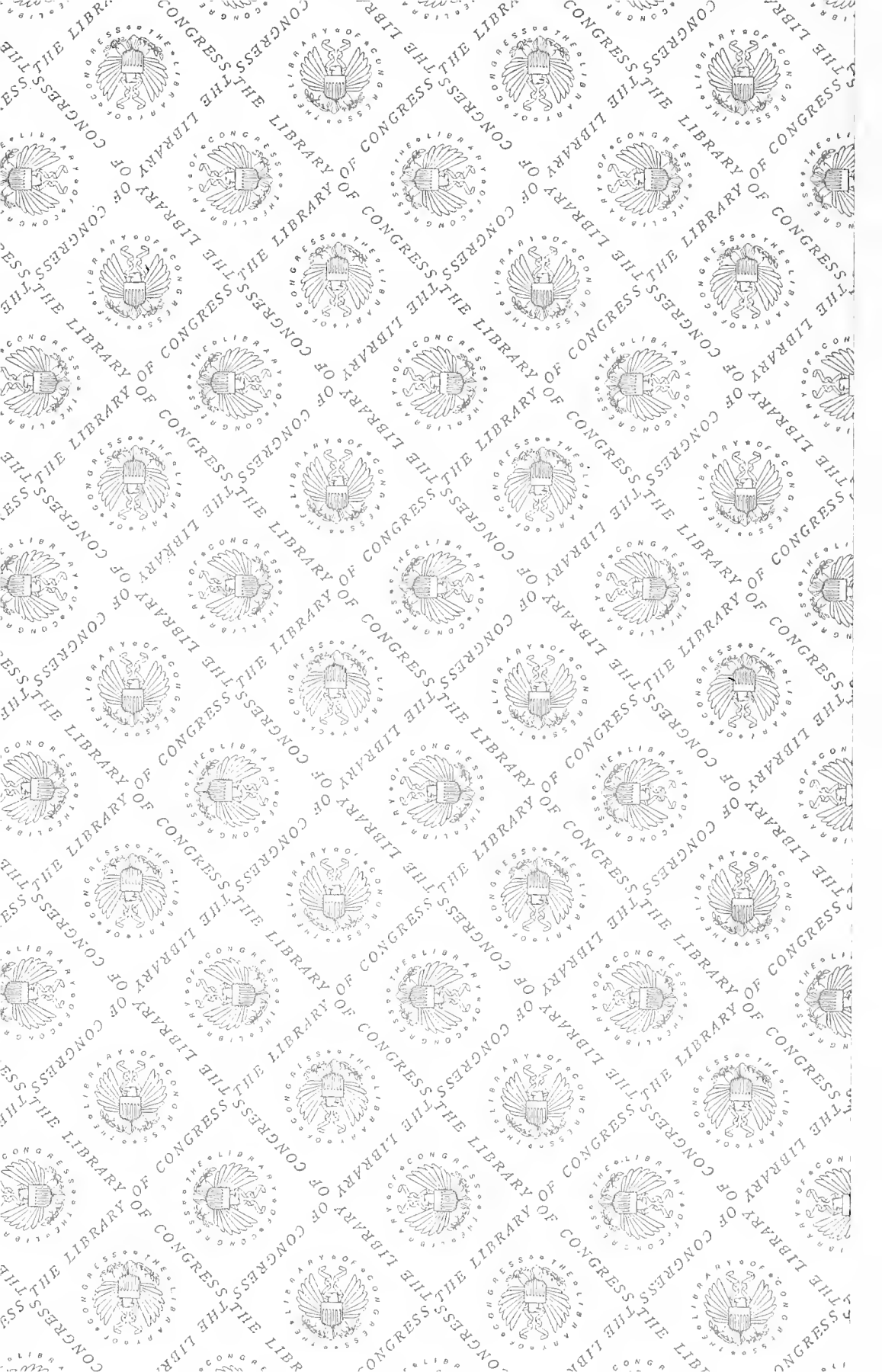
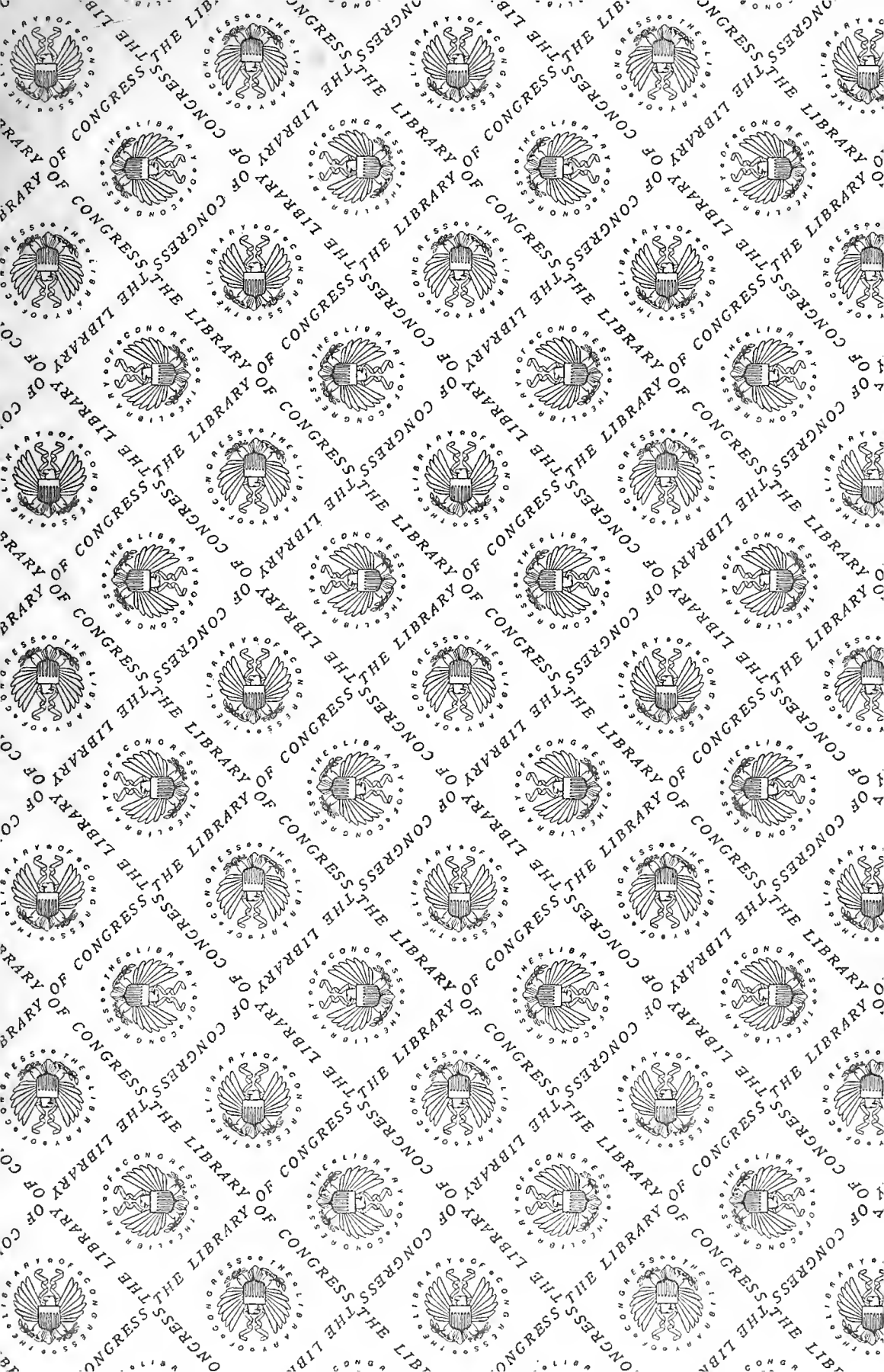


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GREAT FALLS OF THE POTOMAC

Photo by Thomas F. Nelson.

WASHINGTON'S CANAL AROUND THE GREAT FALLS OF THE POTOMAC

ON THE Virginia side of the Potomac river about half a mile below the Great Falls, lying deep down within a thicket of tangled underbrush, are huge crumbling walls of massive masonry and a great cleft in the solid rock carved out to a depth of well nigh 200 feet—all that remains of the first efforts of the promoters of an infant nation to establish a means of unobstructed water communication and transportation between the interior and tide-water.

No more convincing argument for the greatness of George Washington could be presented to the average mind than that furnished by following step by step the rise and decline of this now historic ruin—the Potomac Canal around the Great Falls of the Potomac river.¹

Inter-communication between the coast and the fertile valleys of the frontier was the theme and thought alike of statesman and husbandman for more than a decade prior to the separation of the Colonies from English rule. Natural water-ways were at that time resorted to as the only medium that afforded means of transportation, and this was restricted by reason of the cost in time and labor caused by the frequent obstructions and rapid currents in such streams as could be thus used even by canoes and very small barges. Slack-water navigation was therefore impossible upon natural water courses, hence transportation under existing conditions, even down stream, encountered obstacles almost insurmountable, while the snail-like pace and excessive labor of the return trip up-stream against the current by poling and warping, was scarcely to be considered at all.

Washington after surrendering to Congress his commission as commander-in-chief of the army, retired to Mt. Vernon with the avowed intention of spending the remainder of his days in the avocations of peace. It

¹ Visitors to this historic ruin can reach the spot by the "Old Dominion Electric" from Georgetown, D. C.



GREAT FALLS OF THE POTOMAC FROM THE MARYLAND SIDE

Photo by Miss A. Pratt.

was not a life of selfish ease which he contemplated but an opportunity to consider plans formed many years before, the dominant feature of which involved "the greatest good to the greatest number;" hence it is no surprise to learn of his resolve to visit at this time his lands situated in the Ohio Valley. This was not only a trip involving great hardship and considerable peril but it afforded the opportunity which he desired to obtain by observation some information concerning his "favorite plan" for inland navigation.

Washington's diary covers the details of the journey commencing with his departure from Mt. Vernon on the first day of September, 1784, and from its pages we learn that one object of his journey was "to obtain information of the nearest and best communication between the Eastern & Western Waters; & to facilitate as much as in me lays the Inland Navigation of the Potomack." This was uppermost in his mind, for he commenced his inquiries in that direction on the third day. On the 6th of September his diary tells us he remained all day at Bath and there examined the "Model of a Boat constructed by the ingenious Mr. Rumsey" to whom he gave the following letter:²

"I have seen the model of Mr. Rumsey's Boats constructed to work against stream;—have examined the power upon which it acts:—have been an eye witness to an actual experiment in running water of some rapidity; & do give it as my opinion (altho I had little faith before) that he has discovered the art of propelling Boats, by mechanism & small manual

² Washington, MSS. Letter Book in the Library of Congress, Vol. 6, p. 262.

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Address all Correspondence to

FREDERICK BENNETT WRIGHT

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assistance, against rapid currents;—that the discovery is of vast importance—may be of the greatest usefulness in our inland navigation—& if it succeeds, of which I have no doubt, that the value of it is greatly enhanced by the simplicity of the works, which when seen & explained to, might be executed by the most common mechanics.

“Given under my hand at the town of Bath, County of Berkeley in the State of Virginia this 7th day of Sept, 1784.

GEORGE WASHINGTON”

Here was the inspiration that created the canal around the Great Falls of the Potomac.

Washington continued his journey into Western Pennsylvania. Returning he arrived at Mt. Vernon on the 4th October “having travelled on the same horses since the first day of September by the computed distances 680 miles.”



LOCK NUMBER I

Photo by Thomas F. Nelson.

Prior to the 6th of September there is no suggestion that Washington ever contemplated as a part of his “favorite plan” any such improvement of the Potomac river as would permit navigation by boats of any considerable size, or that would overcome such an obstacle to unobstructed navigation as the Great Falls.

No such colossal work as that which was actually begun but a few months later in the construction of the canal around Great Falls could have been contemplated under the then existing conditions of navigation: Washington’s “favorite plan” was broadened and deepened by the actual experiment which he had just witnessed in the trial of Rumsey’s boat; hence when he returned to Mt. Vernon a month later the whole project

had been fully considered and he was prepared to act. In less than 3 months the Potomac Company was incorporated by concurrent legislative enactments in Maryland and Virginia and on the 7th of May, 1785, organization was effected and George Washington became the first President of the Potomac Company, in which capacity he acted until called to fill a more exalted place—that of First President of the United States of America.

The unselfishness of Washington could not be illustrated in a better manner than by referring to his embarrassment following the action of the Virginia Legislature which by a unanimous vote authorized the treasurer of the State to subscribe for certain shares of the stock “for the benefit of General Washington” in both the James River Company and the Poto-



LOCK NUMBER 2

Photo by Thomas F. Nelson.

mac Company which they had just created by acts of incorporation. When the intelligence reached him of this action, he expressed the gratitude which he felt for the affection displayed, likewise the embarrassment under which he was thereby placed should he decline to accept the benefit proffered in the Act. He feared that his activity in the matter would be ascribed to motives far removed from those which actuated him. In a letter to his nearest personal friends in which he seeks their advice he expresses himself thus: “not content then with the bare consciousness of my having in all this navigation business acted upon the clearest conviction of the political importance of the measure, I would wish that every individual who may hear that it was a favorite plan of mine, may know also, that I had no other motive for promoting it, than the advantage of which I conceived it would

be productive to the Union at large, and to this state in particular, by cementing the eastern and western territory together, at the same time it will give vigour and increase to our commerce and be a convenience to our citizens."³

Washington did not live to see the fruition of his "favorite plan." The work on the canal around Great Falls was only in that condition which might be described as well nigh completed when he was laid to rest at Mt. Vernon. In November, 1797, the "Patowmack Company" recites in their petition set forth in the preamble to an Act of the Maryland General Assembly "that the company, to facilitate the transportation of produce down



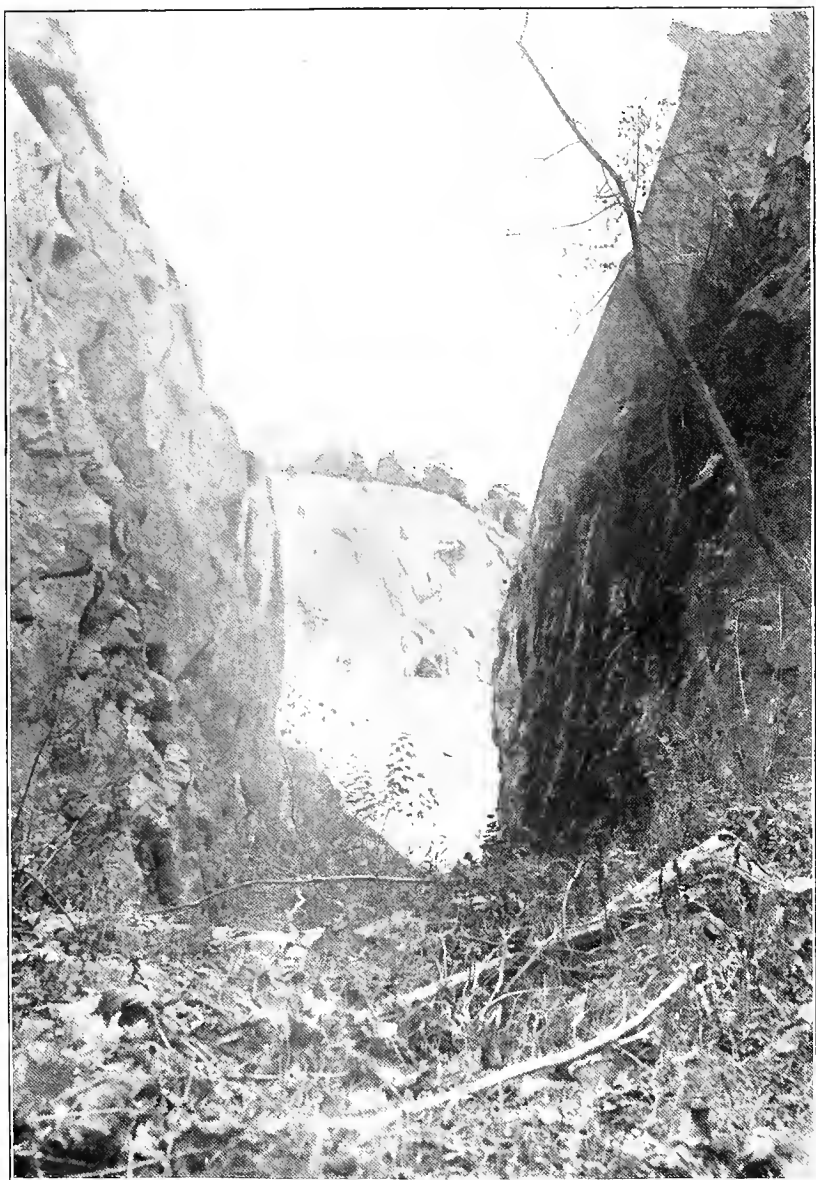
LOCK NUMBER 3

Photo by Thomas F. Nelson.

said river, have constructed an inclined plane from the lower end of the canal to the surface of the river below the Great Falls, by means of which machine all articles can be let down, and those not of great bulk or weight taken up with security and despatch; that a warehouse is also provided for storing such articles when found necessary, or when boats are not ready for transporting said produce down the said river."⁴ The locks around Little Falls

³ Washington's MSS. Letter book in the Library of Congress, Vol. 6, p. 335 dated twenty-second January, 1785, to Hon. Benjamin Harrison and another of same date to Hon. Wm. Grayson.

⁴ *Laws of Maryland*, Chap. 93, November, 1797.



LOCKS 4 AND 5 LOOKING OUT ACROSS THE POTOMAC TOWARDS THE MARYLAND
SIDE

Photo by Thomas F. Nelson.



LOCKS 4 AND 5 LOOKING IN FROM THE POTOMAC RIVER

Photo by Thomas F. Nelson.

were at this time completed and in use. The time for completing the work of opening the Potomac river to navigation was extended by the same Act of the Maryland Assembly to January, 1803.

The great magnitude of the work involved in surmounting the obstacle to navigation interposed by these Falls is set forth in a Report of the Secretary of the Treasury by resolution of the United States Senate, 2 March, 1807, as follows: "The Company incorporated by the States of Virginia and Maryland for improving the navigation of the Potomac river has executed the following works: At a distance of 12 miles above the head of the tide which ascends about 3 miles above the city of Washington, the river is 143 ft. higher than tide-water. At that place designated by the name Great Falls, the boats passing through a canal one mile in length, 6 ft. deep and 25 ft. wide, descend 76 ft. by 5 locks 100 ft. long and 12 ft. wide each and re-entering the river follow its natural bed $8\frac{1}{2}$ miles. Another canal of the same dimensions and $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles in length brings them through 3 locks and by a descent of 37 ft. to tide-water. This last fall is distinguished by the name of Little Falls."⁵

The decline of the Potomac Company began almost simultaneously with the completion of the work on the Canal around the Great Falls and was finished when its charter and property was transferred to the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company in 1825 and the utilization of the natural bed of the Potomac river for transportation purposes was abandoned for still-water navigation offered by means of a canal constructed along the banks on the Maryland side of the river. The works on the Virginia side of the river were abandoned and now there remain only faint traces of their existence aside from the massive walls of cut stone and the great rift in the solid rock that marks the place where these great locks were constructed—mute but impressive monuments to one who stands unchallenged the greatest man in America as well as "The Father of his Country."

This bit of history may serve to call attention to the great question of the conservation and utilization of the water-ways of the Nation. Perhaps it may become apparent at no very remote date that Washington's "favorite plan" was not all a dream or as impracticable as would appear from the fact that this initial effort at the inland navigation of our natural water-ways was a failure and has been a ruin for well-nigh one hundred years.

What obstacle—except the great cost of construction—is to be surmounted in confining such natural water-ways within adequate limits and utilizing the enormous forces of nature therein contained to produce light, heat and power from every gallon of water that precipitation deposits within the water-shed of any stream and withholding the surplus precipitation of the snows of winter and the showers of the spring in storage canals which can be successively drawn upon as needed throughout the year. If this be too Utopian for the present day we are content to leave this record for the information of the historian one hundred years hence.

THOMAS FORSYTHE NELSON.

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⁵ See also *House Report*, No. 228, dated May 22, 1826. Serial No. 142.

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There are three primary and essential points to be considered in tracing every lineage or branch of a family history. That which is within one's own personal knowledge must, of necessity form the basis for every search. When we speak of "personal knowledge" we must include the information or family traditions, either recorded or otherwise, derived from other and older members of the family groups with whom there has been intimacy and personal contact, *i. e.*, parents and grandparents, brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts. All of the genealogical history of a family, beyond that obtained directly from them and lying within their knowledge must be tested by applying these three cardinal principles, viz: Testimony, Evidence and Proof.

It is unfortunate that so many genealogies and family histories have been compiled and printed, and so many lineages constructed and adopted, in which Testimony has been accepted and incorporated as Proof. To assert, as many have done, that a person mentioned in history and bearing the same name, is an ancestor, without so much as seeking for some identifying data as evidence, is the height of folly, and to omit seeking for some

corroborative evidence can be fully appreciated only by those whose assertions of that character have placed them in very embarrassing positions.

Testimony can be said to constitute the *fibers* which form the *threads* of evidence that may be woven together, when a sufficient number of like character and texture have been gathered, into a *web* of proof, and it will be apparent at once that more than one or two *fibers of testimony* are required to form a *thread of evidence*, and that many such threads of evidence of similar texture must be used in weaving a *web of proof*.

The work now being available to those interested in tracing Family History had its beginning in some specific studies and researches into the original local record sources of American history; a modest effort to trace the environment, both social and historical, of individuals and families who have left the impress or their personality upon the questions or events of historical prominence with which they were connected; to learn more of the development of the spirit of independence and boundless ambition that laid the foundation of the greatest Nation in history; to compare the true and false in history with the contemporary record. This has progressed until it can now be said these researches comprise in some degree the major portion of those whose activities between 1760 and 1789 entitle them to be regarded with veneration as the "Fathers of the Nation."

Hundreds of letters of inquiry are being received which cannot be answered because, to do so in an intelligent manner would require some search through thousands of records in my files, which, although the files may be within reach of my hand, requires time. When it is remembered, also, that all such inquiries are for the unknown, very seldom clearly or definitely expressed, it will be apparent that no satisfactory reply can be given except to request further and more definite information as to what is desired. Experience, however, has shown that such a request is seldom complied with but the matter is entirely dropped and thus, not only my time but the stationery and postage is wasted which has been used in the endeavor to be courteous by replying to all letters received.

It is, therefore, to be understood that no reply need be expected to any inquiry of this character unless accompanied with a post-office order for \$2. This sum will justify making the necessary search to form some proper or possible basis for a satisfactory reply.

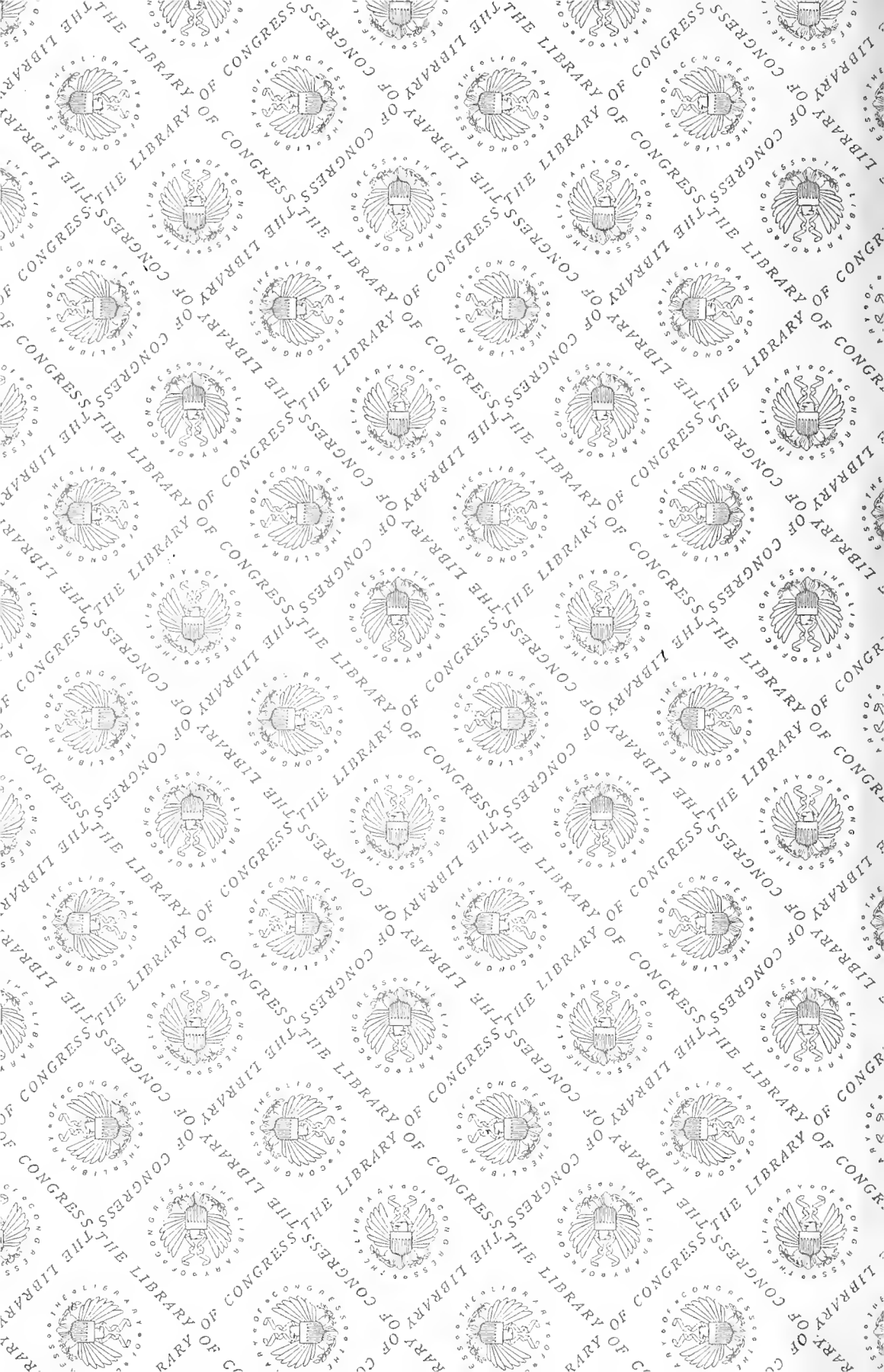
Letters of inquiry as to the whole cost of making genealogical research cannot be answered with any estimate until all the known facts are submitted and some idea gained, from correspondence or interview, as to just how far such a search is to be carried. It may be stated, however, that some *testimony* concerning any individual name inquired about will be included in a reply made under the \$2 remittance above mentioned, and that quite an exhaustive report upon any such individual name, which might reasonably become threads of *evidence*, will be given for \$5, but the cost of connected family groups or lineages covering several generations, with a complete web of proof will be estimated only when all the known data has been submitted.

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